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# THE ROOM WITHOUT WINDOWS

BY LY CHHENG

1

Prior to Tenkuu's birth, the most famous fortune teller in all of Kanagawa prefecture told Tenkuu's mother that Tenkuu would die an early death. Shiho, unconvinced, sought a second opinion, then a third, a fourth, and a fifth. It was unanimous, however, for all five men had bet against her unborn child. None gave an exact date or age, but all came to the same conclusion independently.

After the fifth fortune teller predicted the child would die prematurely, Shiho returned home, went to her bedroom, turned off the lights, and cried with her knees on the floor and her face in her hands. With care, she muffled her moans and whimpers; her firstborn child, Koji, slept in the next room. Her tears seeped through the cracks between her fingers, flowed over her skin, and fell on the floor. She counted to one hundred and decided never to cry for the child ever again. She wiped her hands and face with a dry embroidered cloth and fixed her makeup. She then placed her long straight black hair back into a tight bun.

Shiho told no one what the fortune tellers had told her, not even the women in her close circle of friends, who had been like a second family to her since she'd lost her husband, Toshiro, to tuberculosis. Toshiro had been a doctor in Yamato and one of the most generous and kind-hearted men Shiho had ever known. Toshiro's death had come as a surprise to everyone in their neighborhood. He contracted the disease from a patient, a young child from a neighboring village who could not afford to pay the physicians in his own town. Toshiro had learned of the child from his friend Shinobu, a fisherman who lived next door to the child. Toshiro's kind heart reached out to the child and in the process Toshiro contracted the disease himself. The day Toshiro learned of his disease was the day Shiho learned she was with child.

Although Toshiro lived three months, seven days, and four hours after being

diagnosed, Shiho spent that time apart from him. Toshiro said he would rather die alone, never seeing her again than risk infecting her.

From Tenkuu's birth, his mother avoided looking him in the eyes. While some mothers whispered sweet words into their children's ears, Tenkuu's mother said nothing. She changed his diapers, held him to her chest when he cried, fed him when he was hungry, but did no more than what was necessary to keep him alive and clean. She refused to smell his smell, and when he reached for her hand, she withdrew it.

As Tenkuu grew older and learned of the world, it was natural to him for his older brother Koji to receive the majority of their mother's love. Koji was the first born, the first in line, and naturally the first recipient of all forms of love. Tenkuu loved his brother and mother, but accepted early on in life that not everyone came into the world with an equal claim to love.

It wasn't until the first day of school when Tenkuu was five that he learned that a mother's affections were not always parceled out unevenly among her children.

"My mother loves me more than she loves watching the sun dance on plum trees," said one third-born child.

"My mother loves me more than she loves the ocean's waves at her feet on warm summer mornings," said a fourth-born child.

Tenkuu listened to the children and searched for words to describe his mother, but none came to mind. After he returned home from school, he didn't tell his mother about his discovery but instead, went into his room, sat down on his knees, and slowly tried to forget what he had learned.

That night, before bed, as Tenkuu and Koji washed up, Tenkuu stared at Koji through the mirror which hung in front of both of them. Tenkuu's eyes fumbled over his brother's reflection, searching for a noticeable mark which made Koji's reflection different from his own. They were both slim with dark black hair, thin eyes, and tiny noses shaped like the curve of a flattened

grape. Aside from the difference in height—Koji was taller by about an inch—Tenkuu noticed nothing obviously dissimilar.

"Was mother happy when I was born?" asked Tenkuu.

Koji turned to Tenkuu. Their eyes touched. "Of course," said Koji.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," said Koji.

"Can you remember how she looked?" asked Tenkuu.

"No. I was only two years old then."

"So, you can't be sure she was happy."

"No. But she must have been happy. I can imagine it in my mind. Can't you?"

Tenkuu did not reply. He wanted to share his brother's belief, but could not. He decided to ask his mother.

After finishing in the bathroom, Tenkuu walked over to his mother's bedroom and knocked on her door. "Who is it?" she asked.

"Tenkuu."

There was silence.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I am okay," he said. "May I ask you a question?"

Tenkuu heard footsteps. The door opened and his mother looked down at him with wary eyes. A long red silk robe covered her slim, white body, and her hair was tied back in a tight circular bun, fastened together with a piece of white silk. Tenkuu thought she looked beautiful.

"It's late, Tenkuu," she whispered.

Tenkuu did not move. It was only then that he noticed his mother's eyes never met his own.

"How did you feel when I was born?" he asked.

The curves and folds of expression on her face became as flat and mysterious as a white sheet of paper.

"Go to bed, Tenkuu."

Tenkuu stared at her. She still did not look him in the eyes. He looked at her and hoped she would open up like a flower and envelop him, but instead she stood still.

"Mother?"

"Yes, Tenkuu?"

He moved to the place on the floor where her eyes fell. She softly shifted her eyes away.

"I was very relieved when you were born," she said.

Tenkuu let the words sink in.

"It's time for bed now," she said, then quietly closed the door to her room. After a few seconds, Tenkuu left the hallway and went into his bedroom.

## 2

On the morning of Tenkuu's sixth birthday, which fell on a Sunday, his mother gave him a notebook with a simple black cover. Tenkuu opened it and counted a hundred unlined white pages inside. After thanking her, Tenkuu thumbed through the empty notebook. He looked for an inscription but found none, so he picked up a pen and wrote, "To Tenkuu, with love," and signed his mother's name.

On the morning of Koji's seventh birthday, which fell on a Saturday, Tenkuu heard his mother tiptoe into Koji's room. Tenkuu heard her soft voice. After several minutes, he heard the door to the apartment open and shut.

Tenkuu walked into the living room and found Miss Tanaka, the oldest woman in the building and also the oldest person Tenkuu knew, sitting on their couch.

"Good morning, Tenkuu," said Miss Tanaka. "Your mother took Koji to the circus for his birthday. She asked me to look after you."

Miss Tanaka was a widow and did not have children of her own, but was fond of the children who lived in the building.

"I've never been to the circus before," said Tenkuu.

Miss Tanaka walked over to Tenkuu and placed a hand on his head. The texture of her hand reminded him of thin paper used to wrap presents. She then took out the largest book Tenkuu had ever seen. "Do you like stories, Tenkuu?" she asked.

He looked up at Miss Tanaka, not sure how to answer. "What kind of stories?"

She flipped through the book and showed Tenkuu all the stories inside.

"Pick one," she said. "And I'll read

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**Palm to palm, Tenkuu hoped that what Koji had inside of him, the invisible quality that attracted their mother's love, would transfer to him through that touch.**

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it to you."

Tenkuu flipped through the book and picked one about a man who lived in the mountains waiting for the arrival of his lost family. As Miss Tanaka read it to him, he thought of what a circus would be like.

After silence filled the apartment that night, Tenkuu crawled out of bed and tiptoed into Koji's room. He sat down beside his bed and whispered to him, "Why does mother love you and not me?" He could smell the circus on Koji, a mixture of butter and elephant dung.

"She does love you," said Koji.

"Do you really believe so?"

His brother was silent.

"Yes," said Koji.

Tenkuu stood up and grabbed his brother's hand. Palm to palm, Tenkuu hoped that what Koji had inside of him, the invisible quality that attracted their mother's love, would transfer to him through that touch.

Tenkuu heard footsteps in the hall. He ran quickly for his brother's closet and hid inside.

The door to the room opened and his mother tip-toed in. She sat down next to Koji on the bed. She then leaned in close and kissed him on the forehead. The soft sound of her lips touching Koji's skin echoed in Tenkuu's ears. He realized he didn't know what a kiss from his mother felt like.

The next night, after Tenkuu was done washing up next to Koji in the bathroom, he turned to Koji and poked him. "Do you want to play a game tonight?" he asked.

"What kind of game?"

"Let's switch beds tonight and pretend to be each other," said Tenkuu. "If we pretend hard enough, Koji, maybe we can dream each other's dreams."

Koji agreed.

Tenkuu and Koji put their toothbrushes away and walked towards their bedrooms. Whereas Tenkuu usually

turned right and Koji turned left, tonight they traded paths.

Tenkuu crawled into Koji's bed and imagined being at the circus and having his mother come in to kiss him on the forehead every night.

After all the lights were turned off and the apartment was still, Tenkuu heard footsteps in the hallway. He shut his eyes and pretended to be asleep. The door opened. The footsteps were light and careful. The room smelled of jasmine. Tenkuu felt a weight sink into the bed beside him. Like a dream, he wondered if sleep had already seized him. Her soft lips touched the skin above his eyebrow, and her arms wrapped around him. He was lifted from the bed. His own arms came to life and enveloped her. Her skin was warm and her breath smelled sweet, like the flowers she tended to on the windowsill. Tenkuu knew it wasn't a dream. A cloud of dust on the brink of being something whole, Tenkuu began to feel solid. Her soft arms molded him, and her breath of flowers breathed life into him.

"I love you," she whispered. The words peeled away the cold exterior she had always shown to him, and the smell and sound of her breath entered through his nose and ears.

Before he realized his lips were moving, he heard himself say, "I love you, too." His arms tightened their grip. The silk of her robe felt like the surface of a rose petal.

Her arms released their grip on him and he began to fall back down to the bed. Her body transformed from soft to stiff. He had not taken his arms away yet.

"Tenkuu, why are you in Koji's bed?" she asked. Something ruptured. Tenkuu was silent. He let go of her.

"Where is Koji?" she asked.

He tried to find her eyes in the darkness, but could not.

"He is in my bed."

"Why?"

"He is me tonight."

Shiho then stood up quietly and left the room. The room was still.

Tenkuu crawled out of the bed and went into Koji's closet to lie on the floor.

The next morning, before the sun had risen, Tenkuu opened the door of the closet and entered his mother's room. It was dark, but the blue morning light from the clouds and sun peeked in through the curtains. She slept on one side of the bed, leaving the other side completely empty; she faced the window. Tenkuu walked over to her. Her eyes were open. She did not look away. Staring into her eyes, Tenkuu bent down and sat with his legs tucked underneath him.

Shiho was silent. Her eyes did not move and neither did she. Tenkuu felt the touch of her eyes in the pit of his stomach.

And then they vanished. She shut her eyes, but she didn't turn away.

"Please don't do that," said Tenkuu.

"I'm sorry, Tenkuu. The sun is hurting my eyes."

Tenkuu turned around and saw the sun had risen. He turned back to his mother, her eyes still closed. His hand rose up from his side, almost against his will, and rested softly on his mother's cheek.

He felt something quiver beneath his palm. Her eyes remained closed and Tenkuu stared at her. Under his hand, he felt the warmth that he had always sensed walking by her in the hallway or sitting across from her at the dinner table. It belonged to him now. He had it in his palm. Seconds turned into hours and hours turned into days. Then, she slipped her hand underneath his. For a moment her hand covered her cheek and his hand covered hers. She delicately lifted her hand, thereby removing his. Tenkuu felt amputated, as though beyond his hand there'd been a limb which now was severed. Shiho delicately turned over in her bed.

Tenkuu rose from his sitting position and left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

When Tenkuu returned to his room, he took all the memories he had of his mother and tucked them away in a place only he could ever have access to. He wrapped up all the love he felt for her and crushed it into a tiny ball and hid it away.

For the next eleven years, Tenkuu and his mother would speak less than a sentence to each other.

## THE LATECOMERS

The party is winding down.  
A few guests remain, talking  
or having a smoke by  
the back windows. It has begun  
to rain, a low gray drizzle. Inside,  
the glasses are spotted with  
fingerprints. The fan  
trails blue streamers, nods  
in its plastic cage. Half-  
eaten crudités wilt between  
crumpled napkins.  
The latecomers enter through  
the open door, wander quite  
unnoticed to the bar, where  
they help themselves to a couple of  
drinks and maybe the last  
of the cashews. They talk  
in hushed tones about  
the latest suicide, the silt  
in the drinking water, the dogs  
twitching in their sleep.  
Drinks in hand, they walk  
past the knot of smokers,  
out onto the back porch. The rain  
has stopped. The pool holds  
its blue color in the evening  
light, holds a single, translucent body  
six feet above the ground.

—TAYLOR ALTMAN

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### 3

The summer after Koji's first year of college and Tenkuu's sixth year away at boarding school, Tenkuu returned home to find that Koji had met a girl named Midori. She was from Nagano and shared Koji's interests in art, literature, and foreign films.

Koji, excited to have Tenkuu home, invited him along whenever he spent time with Midori. The three of them spent many afternoons in the summer months together taking walks in the park, telling stories, and eating in tea houses.

One day, while Koji was away, Midori

showed up at the house and invited Tenkuu to the park alone. Tenkuu was confused, but accepted the invitation.

As time went on, Midori and Tenkuu found themselves alone more and more. A special form of gravity had formed between the two of them. Tenkuu would tell Midori where he would be at certain times without inviting her and then secretly hope she would be there. And she always was. One day, Tenkuu asked Midori why they were not spending time with Koji.

Midori bit her lower lip. A look of distress washed over her face. She said she did not know. Tenkuu didn't understand

why she wanted to be alone with him. It was Koji that she wanted.

"I like Koji, but you and I fit together more easily," said Midori.

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe it's the way your eyes look when you read a book or the way you hide your smile when people look directly at you or the way you talk about characters in a book like they are friends who live around the corner."

"What about Koji?" asked Tenkuu.

"Koji is good, but I cannot help how I feel. I'm sorry."

Tenkuu felt flattered that someone preferred him to Koji. He did not want to be dishonest, however. Koji was the person he loved most in the world and who he could honestly say loved him in return. Tenkuu told Midori that he could not betray his brother. She said she understood.

After that Midori became less available to see either Koji or Tenkuu. This concerned Koji immensely. He did not understand why Midori would suddenly stop wanting to see him. Koji asked Tenkuu if he could go speak to her for him. Tenkuu told him he did not feel comfortable going to talk to Midori, but Koji insisted and finally Tenkuu obliged.

Midori was staying with an aunt in Kanagawa. The apartment was within walking distance. Midori lived on the fourteenth floor. When Tenkuu knocked on Midori's door, he could not help feeling that he had already betrayed his brother. She opened the door and they both smiled. Before he knew what was happening, she grabbed his hand and they were headed toward the elevator.

They ascended to the top of the building. When the elevator doors opened, Midori tugged on Tenkuu's hand, took him up a flight of stairs, and introduced him to the view of the world from the top of the building. The sun was just setting. The light blanketed the streets and buildings in an impressionistic mixture of burning yellow, simmering orange, and chaotic red. The buildings sparkled and the cars glowed like fire ants in the streets. He placed a palm on Midori's cheek and felt a warmth he had not felt in eleven years.

That night, Tenkuu returned home feeling guilty. He found Koji in his room and told him everything. Koji was stunned at first but thanked his brother for his honesty.

Tenkuu sensed, however, that Koji could not shake off the slight traces of betrayal entirely. As his relationship with Midori blossomed, he felt his connection with Koji wither. But Tenkuu was so enthralled by the thought of another human finding something in him that he allowed it.

At the end of the summer, Tenkuu did not return to his boarding school in Tokyo. Instead, he moved back in with his mother and Koji. After six months back home, Tenkuu decided to introduce Midori to his mother. He had told Midori about his mother but felt it was time they met. A part of him secretly hoped that maybe Midori could somehow convince his mother of what he himself could not convince her of for seventeen years: that there was something inside of him that could be loved.

The night before Midori was to meet his mother, Tenkuu knocked on his mother's bedroom door. She asked who it was and he said, "Tenkuu." It was more than he had said to her in the past six months.

There was silence on the other side. He heard tiny footsteps and then the door opened. His mother had many gray hairs now, but still had a youthful face. She did not smile, but simply looked at him.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yes, I am fine."

She nodded.

"I just wanted to tell you that I'm bringing someone over tomorrow and I wanted you to meet her."

"A girl?" she asked.

"Yes."

His mother's face was emotionless. She nodded and Tenkuu headed back to his room.

Tenkuu picked up Midori at noon. His mother prepared rice and seaweed. Koji went for a walk.

When Tenkuu and Midori arrived, Tenkuu's mother greeted Midori with a smile. Midori bowed and complimented Tenkuu's mother on the brooch she was wearing. All three sat down in the living room, which was a neat room with just a couch, two chairs, a coffee table, and a rug underneath.

Tenkuu sat on the couch next to Midori and his mother sat in one of the chairs. His mother poured tea and smiled

politely at Midori.

"How did you two meet?" asked Tenkuu's mother.

Midori looked to Tenkuu and smiled. "Koji introduced us. I met Koji in a class and we started spending time together and he brought Tenkuu along with him."

"Oh, you met Koji first."

Shiho began to look around the room, as though she were expecting Koji to appear. She looked back at Tenkuu and Midori. Shiho couldn't help but feel weighed down by the sight of the two of them. As hard as she tried, she couldn't ignore the weight. Something built up inside of her stomach.

"We are still very young, but Midori and I are very serious. We do not think that marriage is unlikely," said Tenkuu.

With those words, Shiho felt something grab hold of her. She felt such pity for the girl sitting before her and then she felt an enormous wave of guilt wash over her. She thought of Toshiro and being unable to see him for the last six months of his life, knowing he would die. It was too cruel.

"Who are you staying with, here?" asked Shiho.

"I'm staying with my aunt, Nanako Shiota," said Midori.

Shiho smiled graciously. They spoke for a few more minutes and then Midori excused herself and said she had to return home for dinner with her aunt.

Tenkuu and Midori left, closing the door to the apartment behind them. Shiho headed to her bedroom, sat down at her desk, took out two sheets of paper and pen and began writing a letter. It was addressed to Nanako Shiota.

The next day Tenkuu went to knock on Midori's door and her aunt answered. Her aunt told him that Midori had left. She had decided to return to Tokyo to continue her studies.

"Did she leave a letter for me?" asked Tenkuu.

"No," said her aunt. Her eyes, Tenkuu noticed. They avoided his eyes.

Tenkuu allowed her to shut the door and then quickly ran home.

Once inside the house, he screamed for his mother. The house was silent. The living room was empty and Koji was nowhere to be heard or seen. The flowers rested in the windowsill and light shone

in. Tenkuu screamed once again. He felt dizzy. The floor beneath him dissolved. He placed a hand on a wall to steady himself.

Tenkuu found her in the bedroom sitting on her bed. She did not react to his shouts. The room shook. He stared into the back of her head, at the garden of gray hairs. He clenched a hand, but then his knees gave beneath him. The words he had trapped in his mouth weighed him down; his knees buckled. In an attempt to hurl a fist at the back of her head, he collapsed down at her feet. Tears sprouted at the corners of his eyes. He extended a hand to her feet and came within inches of touching them. She remained seated on her bed, eyes dead, staring at the wall.

"Why do you hate me?" Tenkuu screamed. "Why do you turn your eyes away? Why do you not touch me? Why? Why?" His fists pounded the floor. The floor shook with the weight of his fists. The wood seemed to splinter. "Tell me!"

"I don't hate you," said his mother. Her voice was steady and calm.

"You lie!" said Tenkuu. "We've lived in this house together for eighteen years and we walk through each other like ghosts!" Shiho remained still.

"What did you say to Midori's aunt?" yelled Tenkuu. "Tell me!"

Shiho clasped her hands together. "I told her that loving you would lead to a lifetime of sorrow."

Tenkuu's eyes could not see his mother any longer for the water in his eyes distorted his vision.

"You are nothing to me now, like I have been nothing to you," said Tenkuu.

Shiho's eyes closed and she felt something inside of her calcify. Paralyzed, she did not move.

Tenkuu turned away and walked out of the room.

That night Tenkuu went into his brother's room and sat down beside his bed. "She is inhuman, Koji. Her existence is unnatural."

Koji had never heard Tenkuu speak of their mother in that way. It angered him. He did not want Tenkuu to defile their mother. "You are crazy," said Koji.

Tenkuu felt something inside of him shrivel up. He thought of when he and Koji pressed their palms together all those years ago.

"I am not crazy," said Tenkuu.

Silence.

"Go to bed," said Koji. "You cannot be me tonight."

Tenkuu walked out of the room and quietly whispered goodbye to his brother.

## 4

The next morning Tenkuu was not in his bed. All of his belongings were in their proper place, nothing was missing. The bed did not appear to be slept in. His mother, Shiho Watanabe, did not realize he was not in the house until late into the evening. Koji Watanabe suggested that they go look for him, but his mother said it was unnecessary. And the two of them left it at that. Although Koji wondered about his brother, he, even to his own surprise, felt it was the natural course of events. The next day Tenkuu's room was cleaned out. All of his belongings were sold. It was unnecessary to get rid of his pictures because no pictures were ever taken of him.

The room Tenkuu slept in—the one room without windows—was left empty for the rest of the time they lived in the house.

Koji Watanabe died of natural causes in his bed at the age of seventy-five. His mother was by his side, as well as his wife Yoko, two sons, Akio and Toshiro, and daughter, Yukiko. Before his death, Koji thought of his brother Tenkuu, but did not speak of him to anyone. At Koji's funeral, Shiho wept profusely.

Shiho outlived Koji by twenty years, living to be one hundred and seven years old. From the day of his disappearance to the day prior to her death, which amounted to approximately eighty-nine years, she never uttered the name Tenkuu.

On the day prior to her death, which was a Sunday, a man came to visit her in her home. Her granddaughter Yukiko was taking care of her at the time. Yukiko let the man in and showed him to Shiho's room. When the man entered the room, he removed his hat to reveal an old leathered face. His eyes were black and glassy, full of a quality that filled the room with light. He sat down on Shiho's bed. Shiho could feel his weight. The man said nothing, but simply sat and looked into Shiho's eyes. ℒ

## EARWIG

I.  
Minute horror of scorpion  
scuttled over clipped grass,  
your forked tail flicking  
out dew behind you,  
staggering over pillows'  
white dunes, not fearing  
the slow-to-waken  
for you have whispered  
subtle morse in our ears,  
slipped like a comma  
from the soft conch,  
for you have translated  
the sea before dawn,  
then weaved to the ground  
we cross over, reassured.

II.  
Or perhaps a semi-colon—  
contingently, you  
on the pillow, in the silk  
flotsam, those  
threads, my lover's hair,  
running-on past fingers,  
past pincers in the umber path  
to her scalp.  
You are a do-without;  
you are easily forgotten.

III.  
Except the initial revulsion  
for even what makes you lovely:  
flexion of lacquered torso,  
clean eyelet of caliper legs.  
Awfully agile, you dark naiad,  
and so calmly minacious, you take  
your advantage on those not  
alert enough to close their ears  
or clap you shut on yourself.  
Children roll awake in their sacs  
and you, despite your cunning,  
your black grace, stamp  
dashes on their dreams.

— JOANNA FIDUCCIA